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The National Capital

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Washington
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Washington, City and Capital

PLAN OF THE CITY OF WASHINGTON MADE IN LONDON IN 1793

VIEW OF THE CITY OF WASHINGTON IN 1838

THE NATIONAL CAPITAL

THE National Capital was founded by George Washington, who planned "the Federal City" which Congress named for him. Last of his great deeds, this interested him more than any other after the winning of the Revolution and the making of the Constitution. Like the Constitution itself, its creation was closely related to the finances of the infant republic. The very idea of a federal district absolutely under national control for a national capital was suggested by the attempt of the unpaid soldiers of the war of the Revolution to collect arrears in 1783, by an attack with arms which frightened Congress out of Philadelphia.

The Federal District was placed on the Potomac as the price to the South of the assumption by the Nation of the state debts of the Revolution as desired

by the North, under the famous agreement between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. Robert Morris, the financier of the Revolution, linked by his personal speculations in the real estate of the new capital, the eighteenth century with the nineteenth, as Jay Cooke, the financier of the Civil War, whose brother was the first Governor of the District of Columbia, linked the nineteenth century with the twentieth. The Federal Treasury, with its connection first with United States banks and later with the sub-treasuries and the national banks, has been the center of the financial interests of the country.

The young national government was penniless when George Washington established the National Capital. He had to beg personnally from the nineteen original proprietors of the farms upon which "the Federal City" now stands, the land needed by the national government for its buildings and for streets and parks, and he had to sell some of this land and to borrow money from Maryland and Virginia, the mother states which had ceded the sovereignty of the ten miles square, to build the President's House, Congress House, and the other government buildings. The far-seeing Washington planned the city on a grand scale, according to his faith in the perpetuity and development of the United States, then so small, so poor, that the men who doubted whether the new government could long survive found many to laugh with them at the plans which the experts cannot now improve upon and which record Washington's genius as books cannot do. The first great expansionist, the only great American who had been west of the Alleghanies,

the man of greatest vision in his time, and with the most confidence in the vitality of the young republic, he planned a national capital for the greatest country in the world.

Washington died in 1799 without seeing the national government moved from Philadelphia to Washington, where it came, under President John Adams, the next year. The death of its founder prevented the national government from beginning, as soon as its increasing income justified the expenditure, the development of the National Capital, on the plans which he had laid down. By the time the United States could no longer plead poverty it had settled in a habit of neglecting its capital, and had thereby encouraged an agitation for the removal of the capital to the Mississippi Valley, which never ceased until after the Civil War, and, which in turn, prevented proper treatment of Washington. Indeed, for seventy-eight years, beyond building structures for its own use, improving their grounds, and building an aqeduct primarily to supply them with water, the national government did practically nothing for the National Capital. The people who lived here had to bear all the rest of the expense of the making and maintenance of the National Capital. At times they went deeply in debt in the undertaking. The burden became so heavy by 1846 that Alexandria, George Washington's market-town, procured the retrocession of the territory Virginia had given south of the Potomac. The task of the nation was too great for the people of the District of Columbia. The Civil War, which made Washington as the seat of government and a prize of the strife at once far

better known and far more precious to the victorious Union, ended all serious talk of removing the capital and brought the national government to realize its obligation.

President Grant and a congress of like politics gave power to a new government of the District, with Alexander R. Shepherd, a native Washingtonian of talent and force, as its ruling spirit. In 1871 it took up the dust-covered plans of George Washington, and began the general improvement of the streets and avenues of Washington City. The time was short and the work was done hastily and roughly, (the city was only plowed up,) but so thoroughly that it was easier to complete it than to undo it, and all the subsequent development has come from it.

The protest of the District tax-payers, still expected to pay for such improvements and grievously overburdened, the panic of 1873, and a change in the political control in Congress, ended the "Shepherd regimé," with its territorial form of government and its two Governors, Henry D. Cooke and Alexander R. Shepherd. This was the first executive government for the entire federal District. The cities of Washington, Georgetown, and Alexandria had had separate municipal governments, with Mayors and Councils elected by qualified voters, while the counties of Washington and Alexandria had county governments.

From 1874 until 1878 Congress was considering a permanent form of government, meanwhile confiding the administration to a temporary Commission of three. Congress in the exercise of its con-

stitutional power "of exclusive legislation" over the District of Columbia had to provide an executive government; it had to provide for a just recognition of the duty of the National Government to its Capital, and of its obligation as the owner by gift of more than a half of the city of Washington. It determined that there should be an executive government of three Commissioners, two appointed by the President of the United States from residents of the District, and the third an army engineer of high rank, and that the United States should pay annually one-half of the municipal expenses and should assume one-half of the bonded debt incurred by the territorial government. It made no provision for the Nation's arrears estimated at seventy-five millions. The property holders generally wished to relinquish the suffrage exercised until 1874, and Congress, appreciating their reasons and also regarding it as incompatible with the new financial arrangements, since the United States could not submit to be taxed by District voters, abolished the privilege of voting.

In June, 1878, the act which the United States Supreme Court terms "the Constitution of the District of Columbia," was passed, and since then the entire District has been under the executive government of the Commissioners, which is actually a government by public opinion, as there is no partisan politics, no "boss," or "machine," or partisan newspaper, to confuse or defeat the voice of the people. Although there is general hope that some day Senator Hoar's proposition to have the National Government bear all the expenses of the National Capital over and beyond what the District residents contri-

bute under reasonable average taxation, the "half-and-half plan" is so great an improvement on the conditions preceding it, that it has been generally acceptable both in Congress and in the District. Modern Washington and its suburban towns have practically developed under the present form of government. The progress made in twenty-five years is the sure prophecy of the progress to be made in the future. The National Capital, now that it has been fully taken into the life of the nation, must grow with its growth—as the country deserves. The population of the District, numbering over three-hundred-twenty thousand, with a tax levy of about five-and-a-half million (under a dollar-and-a-half-a-thousand rate and a two-thirds assessment,) is doing its full share for the present and for the future. As it increases and spreads all over the hills of the District, until the city of Washington extends to the District line, it will do its part in making this more and more the most beautiful capital in the world.

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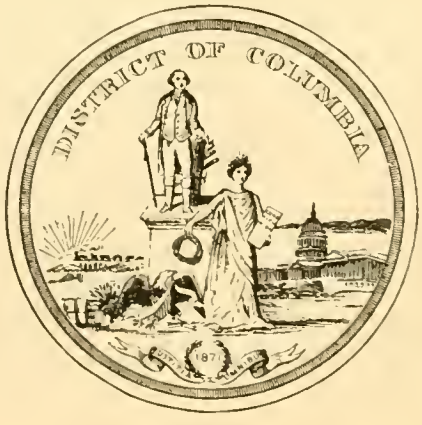

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